

Chapter XXXVI. In M. Colbert's Carriage.

As Gourville had seen, the king's musketeers were mounting and following their captain. The latter, who did not like to be confined in his proceedings, left his brigade under the orders of a lieutenant, and set off on post horses, recommending his men to use all diligence. However rapidly they might travel, they could not arrive before him. He had time, in passing along the Rue des Petits-Champs, to see something which afforded him plenty of food for thought and conjecture. He saw M. Colbert coming out from his house to get into his carriage, which was stationed before the door. In this carriage D'Artagnan perceived the hoods of two women, and being rather curious, he wished to know the names of the ladies hid beneath these hoods. To get a glimpse at them, for they kept themselves closely covered up, he urged his horse so near the carriage, that he drove him against the step with such force as to shake everything containing and contained. The terrified women uttered, the one a faint cry, by which D'Artagnan recognized a young woman, the other an imprecation, in which he recognized the vigor and aplomb that half a century bestows. The hoods were thrown back: one of the women was Madame Vanel, the other the Duchesse de Chevreuse. D'Artagnan's eyes were quicker than those of the ladies; he had seen and known them, whilst they did not recognize him; and as they laughed at their fright, pressing each other's hands,--

"Humph!" said D'Artagnan, "the old duchesse is no more inaccessible to friendship than formerly. She paying her court to the mistress of M. Colbert! Poor M. Fouquet! that presages you nothing good!"

He rode on. M. Colbert got into his carriage and the distinguished trio commenced a sufficiently slow pilgrimage toward the wood of Vincennes. Madame de Chevreuse set down Madame Vanel at her husband's house, and, left alone with M. Colbert, chatted upon affairs whilst continuing her ride. She had an inexhaustible fund of conversation, that dear duchesse, and as she always talked for the ill of others, though ever with a view to her own good, her conversation amused her interlocutor, and did not fail to leave a favorable impression.

She taught Colbert, who, poor man! was ignorant of the fact, how great a minister he was, and how Fouquet would soon become a cipher. She promised to rally around him, when he should become surintendant, all the old nobility of the kingdom, and questioned him as to the preponderance it would be proper to allow La Valliere. She praised him, she blamed him, she bewildered him. She showed him the secret of so many secrets that, for a moment, Colbert thought he was doing business with the devil. She proved to him that she held in her hand the Colbert of to-day, as she had held the Fouquet of yesterday; and as he asked her very simply the reason of her hatred for the surintendant: "Why do you

yourself hate him?" said she.

"Madame, in politics," replied he, "the differences of system oft bring about dissensions between men. M. Fouquet always appeared to me to practice a system opposed to the true interests of the king."

She interrupted him.--"I will say no more to you about M. Fouquet. The journey the king is about to take to Nantes will give a good account of him. M. Fouquet, for me, is a man gone by--and for you also."

Colbert made no reply. "On his return from Nantes," continued the duchesse, "the king, who is only anxious for a pretext, will find that the States have not behaved well--that they have made too few sacrifices. The States will say that the imposts are too heavy, and that the surintendant has ruined them. The king will lay all the blame on M. Fouquet, and then--"

"And then?" said Colbert.

"Oh! he will be disgraced. Is not that your opinion?"

Colbert darted a glance at the duchesse, which plainly said: "If M. Fouquet be only disgraced, you will not be the cause of it."

"Your place, M. Colbert," the duchesse hastened to say, "must be a high place. Do you perceive any one between the king and yourself, after the fall of M. Fouquet?"

"I do not understand," said he.

"You will understand. To what does your ambition aspire?"

"I have none."

"It was useless, then, to overthrow the superintendent, Monsieur Colbert. It was idle."

"I had the honor to tell you, madame--"

"Oh! yes, I know, all about the interest of the king--but, if you please, we will speak of your own."

"Mine! that is to say, the affairs of his majesty."

"In short, are you, or are you not endeavoring to ruin M. Fouquet? Answer without evasion."

"Madame, I ruin nobody."

"I am endeavoring to comprehend, then, why you purchased from me the letters of M. Mazarin concerning M. Fouquet. Neither can I conceive why you have laid those letters before the king."

Colbert, half stupefied, looked at the duchesse with an air of constraint.

"Madame," said he, "I can less easily conceive how you, who received the money, can reproach me on that head--"

"That is," said the old duchesse, "because we must will that which we wish for, unless we are not able to obtain what we wish."

"Will!" said Colbert, quite confounded by such coarse logic.

"You are not able, hein! Speak."

"I am not able, I allow, to destroy certain influences near the king."

"That fight in favor of M. Fouquet? What are they? Stop, let me help you."

"Do, madame."

"La Valliere?"

"Oh! very little influence; no knowledge of business, and small means. M. Fouquet has paid his court to her."

"To defend him would be to accuse herself, would it not?"

"I think it would."

"There is still another influence, what do you say to that?"

"Is it considerable?"

"The queen-mother, perhaps?"

"Her majesty, the queen-mother, has a weakness for M. Fouquet very prejudicial to her son."

"Never believe that," said the old duchesse, smiling.

"Oh!" said Colbert, with incredulity, "I have often experienced it."

"Formerly?"

"Very recently, madame, at Vaux. It was she who prevented the king from

having M. Fouquet arrested."

"People do not forever entertain the same opinions, my dear monsieur. That which the queen may have wished recently, she would not wish, perhaps, to-day."

"And why not?" said Colbert, astonished.

"Oh! the reason is of very little consequence."

"On the contrary, I think it is of great consequence; for, if I were certain of not displeasing her majesty, the queen-mother, my scruples would be all removed."

"Well! have you never heard talk of a certain secret?"

"A secret?"

"Call it what you like. In short, the queen-mother has conceived a bitter hatred for all those who have participated, in one fashion or another, in the discovery of this secret, and M. Fouquet I believe is one of these."

"Then," said Colbert, "we may be sure of the assent of the queen-mother?"

"I have just left her majesty, and she assures me so."

"So be it, then, madame."

"But there is something further; do you happen to know a man who was the intimate friend of M. Fouquet, M. d'Herblay, a bishop, I believe?"

"Bishop of Vannes."

"Well! this M. d'Herblay, who also knew the secret, the queen-mother is pursuing with the utmost rancor."

"Indeed!"

"So hotly pursued, that if he were dead, she would not be satisfied with anything less than his head, to satisfy her he would never speak again."

"And is that the desire of the queen-mother?"

"An order is given for it."

"This Monsieur d'Herblay shall be sought for, madame."

"Oh! it is well known where he is."

Colbert looked at the duchesse.

"Say where, madame."

"He is at Belle-Ile-en-Mer."

"At the residence of M. Fouquet?"

"At the residence of M. Fouquet."

"He shall be taken."

It was now the duchesse's turn to smile. "Do not fancy the capture so easy," said she; "do not promise it so lightly."

"Why not, madame?"

"Because M. d'Herblay is not one of those people who can be taken when and where you please."

"He is a rebel, then?"

"Oh! Monsieur Colbert, we have passed all our lives in making rebels, and yet you see plainly, that so far from being taken, we take others."

Colbert fixed upon the old duchesse one of those fierce looks of which no words can convey the expression, accompanied by a firmness not altogether wanting in grandeur. "The times are gone," said he, "in which subjects gained duchies by making war against the king of France. If M. d'Herblay conspires, he will perish on the scaffold. That will give, or will not give, pleasure to his enemies,--a matter, by the way, of little importance to us."

And this, a strange word in the mouth of Colbert, made the duchesse thoughtful for a moment. She caught herself reckoning inwardly with this man--Colbert had regained his superiority in the conversation, and he meant to keep it.

"You ask me, madame," he said, "to have this M. d'Herblay arrested?"

"I?--I ask you nothing of the kind!"

"I thought you did, madame. But as I have been mistaken, we will leave him alone; the king has said nothing about him."

The duchesse bit her nails.

"Besides," continued Colbert, "what a poor capture would this bishop be! A bishop game for a king! Oh! no, no; I will not even take the slightest notice of him."

The hatred of the duchesse now discovered itself.

"Game for a woman!" said she. "Is not the queen a woman? If she wishes M. d'Herblay arrested, she has her reasons. Besides, is not M. d'Herblay the friend of him who is doomed to fall?"

"Oh! never mind that," said Colbert. "This man shall be spared, if he is not the enemy of the king. Is that displeasing to you?"

"I say nothing."

"Yes--you wish to see him in prison, in the Bastile, for instance."

"I believe a secret better concealed behind the walls of the Bastile than behind those of Belle-Isle."

"I will speak to the king about it; he will clear up the point."

"And whilst waiting for that enlightenment, Monsieur l'Eveque de Vannes will have escaped. I would do so."

"Escaped! he! and whither should he escape? Europe is ours, in will, if not in fact."

"He will always find an asylum, monsieur. It is evident you know nothing of the man you have to do with. You do not know D'Herblay; you do not know Aramis. He was one of those four musketeers who, under the late king, made Cardinal de Richelieu tremble, and who, during the regency, gave so much trouble to Monseigneur Mazarin."

"But, madame, what can he do, unless he has a kingdom to back him?"

"He has one, monsieur."

"A kingdom, he! what, Monsieur d'Herblay?"

"I repeat to you, monsieur, that if he wants a kingdom, he either has it or will have it."

"Well, as you are so earnest that this rebel should not escape, madame, I promise you he shall not escape."

"Belle-Isle is fortified, M. Colbert, and fortified by him."

"If Belle-Isle were also defended by him, Belle-Isle is not impregnable;

and if Monsieur l'Eveque de Vannes is shut up in Belle-Isle, well, madame, the place shall be besieged, and he will be taken."

"You may be very certain, monsieur, that the zeal you display in the interest of the queen-mother will please her majesty mightily, and you will be magnificently rewarded; but what shall I tell her of your projects respecting this man?"

"That when once taken, he shall be shut up in a fortress from which her secret shall never escape."

"Very well, Monsieur Colbert, and we may say, that, dating from this instant, we have formed a solid alliance, that is, you and I, and that I am absolutely at your service."

"It is I, madame, who place myself at yours. This Chevalier d'Herblay is a kind of Spanish spy, is he not?"

"Much more."

"A secret ambassador?"

"Higher still."

"Stop--King Phillip III. of Spain is a bigot. He is, perhaps, the confessor of Phillip III."

"You must go higher even than that."

"Mordieu!" cried Colbert, who forgot himself so far as to swear in the presence of this great lady, of this old friend of the queen-mother. "He must then be the general of the Jesuits."

"I believe you have guessed it at last," replied the duchesse.

"Ah! then, madame, this man will ruin us all if we do not ruin him; and we must make haste, too."

"Such was my opinion, monsieur, but I did not dare to give it you."

"And it was lucky for us he has attacked the throne, and not us."

"But, mark this well, M. Colbert. M. d'Herblay is never discouraged; if he has missed one blow, he will be sure to make another; he will begin again. If he has allowed an opportunity to escape of making a king for himself, sooner or later, he will make another, of whom, to a certainty, you will not be prime minister."

Colbert knitted his brow with a menacing expression. "I feel assured

that a prison will settle this affair for us, madame, in a manner satisfactory for both."

The duchesse smiled again.

"Oh! if you knew," said she, "how many times Aramis has got out of prison!"

"Oh!" replied Colbert, "we will take care that he shall not get out this time."

"But you were not attending to what I said to you just now. Do you remember that Aramis was one of the four invincibles whom Richelieu so dreaded? And at that period the four musketeers were not in possession of that which they have now--money and experience."

Colbert bit his lips.

"We will renounce the idea of the prison," said he, in a lower tone: "we will find a little retreat from which the invincible cannot possibly escape."

"That was well spoken, our ally!" replied the duchesse. "But it is getting late; had we not better return?"

"The more willingly, madame, from my having my preparations to make for setting out with the king."

"To Paris!" cried the duchesse to the coachman.

And the carriage returned towards the Faubourg Saint Antoine, after the conclusion of the treaty that gave to death the last friend of Fouquet, the last defender of Belle-Isle, the former friend of Marie Michon, the new foe of the old duchesse.